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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

What's in A Name, You Pinko?

BY WILLIAM LEVIN

Last week I sent a check to the American Civil Liberties Union to renew my membership. As I sealed the envelope the phrase “card-carrying member of the ACLU” popped into my memory. “Where did that come from?” I wondered. I felt a vague sense that my membership in the ACLU was in some way illicit, radical or even dangerous. I recall George Bush, the elder, “accusing” Michael Dukakis of being a card-carrying ACLU member, but I think the phrase cannot have been original with Bush. (What was?) But wherever it started, it was certainly a strange way of talking. After all, the ACLU is an organization dedicated to “defending and preserving the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to all people in this country by its Constitution and laws.” So how did it get to feel like my membership put me in league with spies and other un-American filth? The answer has to do with what we sociologists call the “labeling” process and its unholy uses.

It seems to me that in some cases a label is attached to a person or behavior out of some free-floating malice, the kind that tags the new boy in school Tubby. The kids who do the naming benefit only briefly by the laugh they provoke, or the sense of power that labeling confers. But in the world of adults, the label that sticks can have far more concrete pay-offs. Take, for example, the labeling of ACLU members as “card-carrying.” The label echoes a phrase from the Army/McCarthy hearings of the 1950’s in which Joseph McCarthy, U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, made daily headlines with his pumped-up search for Communists in govern-



A former Broadway star, Helen Gahagan Douglas served as representative of California's Fourteenth District from 1945-1951. She is shown here after casting her vote in 1950.



Richard Nixon during his 1950 congressional race against Helen Gahagan Douglas.

ment and the entertainment industry. He accused countless citizens of being “card-carrying members of the Communist Party”, meaning a person who was actually a member of a communist organization at some level. Since then, anyone who carried a membership card in any organization could be “accused” with such language. But I can’t ever remember hearing anyone being asked if he or she was a “card-carrying member of the Chamber of Commerce.” So how did the term come to stick to the ACLU? After thinking about such labels, I have come to the conclusion that conservatives in general, and Republicans in particular, are particularly talented at inventing and applying such labels, and from benefiting from the act. In fact, they make liberal Democrats look like amateurs. Consider the following examples.

Richard Nixon first won a seat in the U.S. Congress in a 1950 race against Helen Gahagan Douglas whose reputation he stained by repeatedly referring to her as “The Pink Lady.” She was no more a Communist than he was, but she could hardly make political headway with the slogan “I’m no Communist.” In fact, the label “Pinko” was used by conservative candidates at all levels of political ambition, throughout the Cold War, and beyond. As a label, the term “pink” had spread beyond the specific meaning of “member of the Communist Party” to encompass any sort of thinking that could be argued to be collective and communal as opposed to individual. Thus, the defeat of the Clinton’s first-term effort to create a national health-care policy went down in pink flames when conservative politicians and interested health industry groups labeled it (in any of its proposed forms) as “socialized medicine.”

The very term “liberal” has been successfully cast as a slur. Presidential candidates since Ronald Reagan have confidently “accused” their opponents of being liberals. In what sense is the term “liberal” a slur? I don’t know, except to the extent that it is made to sound like a slur, as in the way the comedian George Carlin cringes at the news that he has been

discovered to be a closet heterosexual. Perhaps a concerted and well-financed campaign could make conservative sound like a slur.

One of my favorite slurring labels is “politically correct.” Some ten or so years ago, efforts in government and education to acknowledge that not everyone is the same in America gained some real momentum. Textbooks, for example, no longer used male pronouns for indefinite references, as in “If a person wants to make an impression, he should dress well.” Instead, “or she” was increasingly added to such sentences for balance. And the process was applied to our long-overdue attention to other groups such as Native Americans, Blacks and people from other countries on Earth. It was not long before such locutions were ridiculed as “political correctness.” Yes, exactly. I don’t like to say that “businessmen make deals” if there are women in business. What is the affront to you if, instead, we start using terms like entrepreneurs, firefighters rather than firemen and so on? The conservative columnist Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe* ridicules opposition to the use of Native American images as mascots for sports teams in the full confidence that the label “political

correctness” is clearly negative and killing in its force.

Rush Limbaugh is also skillful in the invention and application of negative labels for liberal thought and behavior. I find his use of the term “Feminazis” for people who believe in the equality of the sexes to be doubly evil. It is vicious to feminism, leading some to think of all of its ideas as manifestly dangerous, in the way Naziism was dangerous. It also trivializes the seriousness of the holo-



Rush Limbaugh

caust by labeling members of an essentially idealistic movement with those of Nazi mass-murderers.

About ten years ago some Republicans began referring to their political opponents as members of the “Democrat party.” During his campaign for the presidency, Kansas senator Bob Dole never used any other term. It sounded strange. Why not Democratic party? I finally found out on a web site run by a group of Republican college students. It turns out that Republicans decided that Democrats are not democratic in their behavior, and so should not be called democratic. Thus, the term “Democrat party” is a concerted effort intended to change the perception of a group of people.

And lastly, the most recent label on my list of label hates is the phrase “schools that fail.” This one takes a very complex set of issues, and reduces them to a single pejorative. If students do badly on any of a set of measures, then it cannot be that because they spend too much time in front of the television, movie screen, computer or game station. It cannot be that their parents do not, or cannot, spend the time to read with them or check that they do their homework. It cannot be that the difficulties presented by poverty and dangerous neighborhoods dominate the minds and emotions of poorer students. No, it is just that the schools are bad. Perhaps it is the teachers who need to be blamed to the exclusion of all else.

The power to name is the power to shape understanding. It is among the most well accepted of ideas in sociology that the label carried by a person, a behavior or an idea determines to a large degree how it is evaluated. Young women who first come into contact with the ideas of feminism often find them appealing, only to reject them when they are told that this is feminism. If the label has enough negative association, it can swamp the real, underlying meaning of the ideas. As a liberal I don’t know whether to be jealous of the conservatives’ talent for tainting with labels, or proud that our political strategies do not run in that direction. In either case, we have been losing the labeling battle for decades. Just ask Slick Willy.

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